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AUTHOR Okura, K. Patrick
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ABSTRACT

Learning disability has become one of the most serious afflictions of childhood in the United States. Approximately 6 to 15 percent of American children have difficulty in learning how to read. In contrast, educators and other professionals in China and Japan report that dyslexia is rather rare in their countries except in cases where there is a clear neurological disorder. Differences in language structures are cited as one possible explanation. Another explanation offered is that parents in China and Japan provide their children with different preschool experiences from those provided by American parents. Some researchers have challenged these views. However, a number of studies, conducted in China and Japan and in the United States seem to indicate that differences in cognitive ability between Japanese, Chinese and American children do exist. These apparent differences present a question for comparative investigation, but, if the research is to be legitimate, equal respect must be given to the cultural heritages and experiences of the ethnic groups involved. (Author/BB)

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COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ASIAN CHILDREN

and

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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by

K. Patrick Okura
Assistant Director for International Programs
National Institute of Mental Health

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One of the most pervasive of all mental health problems has been given a variety of names--including, learning disability or disorder, specific reading disability, congenital word blindness, and dyslexia (literally "difficulty with words" but commonly used to mean reading impairment). By whatever label, it is a significant cause of emotional distress and behavioral disorders among children and adolescents and an important source of family dissention.

The National Advisory Committee on Dyslexia and Related Reading Disorders concluded in 1969, that such disorders affect about 15% of otherwise able school children. It is a condition that is described of those children who are severely retarded in reading but are of average or above-average intelligence and are free from any gross handicaps whether they are sensory, neurological, or psychological and have had the usual educational opportunities. For no obvious reason they fail to read adequately and because of this failure, are subjected to years of frustration, humiliation, self-deprication, and torment. Unfortunately, some are judged retarded because they cannot read and are assigned to classes for the mentally retarded children.

A number of studies have shown that reading failure is most prevalent among children who have been culturally disadvantaged. Data have shown that a high percentage were children from families low on the socio-economic scale.

Learning disability has become one of the most serious afflictions of childhood in our country. Strong evidence has been found that the lack of

essential pre-reading skills can be readily detected at the age of kindergarten and probably well before. There is promising evidence that training programs can be instituted to coordinate hand and brain and thus prevent development of actual learning disabilities.

As one pours through the literature on the subject of learning disability, you find that many educators and other professionals in China and Japan report that dyslexia is rather rare except in cases where there is a clear neurological disorder. As mentioned before, when one looks at the problem in the United States you will find approximately 6 to 15 percent of the American children have difficulty in learning to read. Why is there such a contrast in children from these two parts of the world? One possible explanation for the difference is the autographic system used in the three different languages involved. Both Chinese and Japanese written language use syllalic characters or idiograms that provide consistency between grapheme and phonology and possibly for response to whole units that do not exist in the alphabetic language such as English. The second possible explanation is that parents in Japan and China provide more instruction training in cognitive skills and interaction fostering achievement than their counterpart American parents both before and after children enter school. Also, both the Japanese and Chinese educational systems are more rigorous in the very early years and pre-school instruction in reading and other academic skills are more common than in the United States.

Even some of us who are born of Japanese and Chinese parents in this country attended pre-school classes from age 3 to 5 before we entered

kindergarten in the public school system. Educators in both China and Japan deny that learning disabilities exist, except in an extremely small proportion of children in their countries.

Some researchers have challenged this by stating that possibly the Chinese and Japanese fail to acknowledge that children have learning disabilities and therefore fail to identify them. This suggestion was recently made by Kritchley by the following statement:

"The most probable explanation is that in Japan, teachers, neurologists, and educational psychologists are not alive to the possible occurrence of dyslexia."

This statement prompted a very vigorous reply from Dr. Makita, a Japanese psychiatrist. He states, "They are alive, moreover they are searching diligently for dyslectic children, but the plain fact is that such Japanese specialists do not get such referrals."

Dr. Makita who is Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science at Tokyo Tokai University, School of Medicine, continued his reply to Kritchley in the following manner:

"While dyslexia, reading disability, reading difficulty, reading retardation, or whatever you prefer to call it, comprises a formidable portion of child psychiatric practice in Western countries, its incidence in Japan is so rare that the specialists in Japan do not get any referrals. In fact, none has been brought to this author since he started a child psychiatric service in 1958. Additionally, more recent research in Tokyo by Doctors Morinaga and Sasaki, has supported the position of Dr. Makita."

Educators and psychologists in the People's Republic of China also deny the presence of learning disabilities. It has been reported by recent visitors to the People's Republic of China that the only difficulties that are present are due to damage of the central nervous system. They asked in their visits to kindergarten and elementary schools about children with disabilities in learning. While acknowledging the presence of difficulties due to damage to the central nervous system which are strictly medical problems, the Chinese repeatedly denied that there were children of normal intelligence who had serious difficulties in doing their school work. They did recognize individual differences among children, but they stated that individual differences are assumed to influence the rate at which the child can be taught, but not the ultimate attainments that are possible. Other recent observers have stated that teachers seem puzzled by the idea that children could possibly have difficulty in learning to read.

Dr. C.C. Shu, Director of the Department of Psychiatry of the National Taiwan University Hospital, has stated that in his nearly 30 years at the Hospital, only a few reading disabilities have ever been encountered. These, he states, have typically had an organic basis; however, he has had experience in treating American children attending Taipei American schools who have been referred to him because of reading problems.

A very interesting fact is that there is no word in either the Chinese of Japanese language that can be directly translated as reading disability.

These apparently large differences among children in Japan and China and the United States present a compelling question for comparative

investigation. A better understanding of the genesis and remediation of these disabilities would result from examinations of performances of samples of typical children in the three locations. Results concerning the level and determinants of achievement could then be used as a basis for evaluating the nature and incident of reading disabilities in each location.

Klein, 1977, in a recent paper delivered at the World Congress on Mental Health, held in Vancouver, British Columbia, has described the significance of reading problems for mental health among Western children and the need for cross-cultural research in rather dramatic terms: "The devastating mental health ravages caused by dyslexia make it imperative that new avenues of research be explored." Various child psychiatric clinics have reported that one-third to one-half of all children and adolescents coming for consultation have a basic language disability as their primary problem. Eisenberg has stated that every dyslexic who does not receive adequate treatment will develop either a severe personality problem or definitive psychiatric disorder. Loretta Bender recently reviewed the records of 5,000 boys treated as inpatients at the children's service of Bellevue Hospital in New York City. She reported that those under the age of 12 -- 50 percent had a severe reading disability. Of those between the ages of 12 and 16, seventy-five percent had severe reading disability. Several studies have indicated that 75 to 80 percent of boys appearing in juvenile court have severe reading problems. Yet far too little attention has been paid to trans-cultural factors in

dyslexia. How puzzling that such widespread and seemingly complex problems have not been more closely examined in the light of differences in languages in various countries.

In view of this situation the National Institute of Mental Health is presently funding a research project entitled, "Correlates of Early Reading Achievement Cross-Cultured," to Dr. Harold Stevenson at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Michigan. The purpose of Dr. Stevenson's study is to investigate the academic achievement of groups of children in Japan, Taiwan, and the United States, during the children's first and last years of elementary school. Two questions are of central interest. First, what are the cognitive correlates and precursors of early academic achievement in these three locales. Second, what is the relation between the behavior of parents and teachers to children's scholastic achievement, especially the degree to which parents participate in the preparation of children for school and are involved in the scholastic activities of the child after they have entered school.

Chinese children and Japanese children in America

Research on Chinese and Japanese children outside the Orient has been conducted primarily in the United States. Several studies are well known, and the test of the intellectual strengths of these children. Most of these studies have dealt with cognitive abilities rather than achievement in school.

Perhaps the best known and most influential are the studies of Lesser and his colleagues. In these studies undertaken in New York and Boston, the performance of Chinese children was compared to that of Jewish, Black,

and Puerto Rican children on tests constructed to tap verbal, reasoning, numerical and spatial abilities. Chinese and Jewish children had their highest levels of performance on the reasoning, numerical, and spatial tasks. The Chinese children received their lowest scores on the verbal task.

Another extensive study was reported by Werner, Beirman, and French, (1971), of over a thousand children born in Hawaii. The children were studied for over a decade. Japanese children had the highest Cattell scores during infancy and at every social class level whether middle, working, or lower class. The Japanese children had fewer intellectual achievement and emotional problems than children from other ethnic groups. At age 10, the Japanese and Anglo performance on the primary mental abilities test was very similar, except for the higher scores on numerical ability for the Japanese and a higher verbal score for the Anglo children. The authors suggested that one of the major reasons for the high performance of the Japanese, ". . .is the fact that in the majority of Japanese homes emphasis placed on the value of education, on disciplined work habits, and on respect and esteem for intellectual pursuit, even when the parents have not had much education."

Other studies include those of Leifer, 1972, who compared the performance of Chinese, Italian, Black, and Puerto Rican children on four types of tasks (construction of mosaics, understanding body parts, verbal fluency, and figure copying). Chinese children received the highest scores on the first two tasks, but were low in verbal fluency.

A comparison of Asian, Black, Jewish and non-Jewish white adolescents was made by Backman (1971), who used scores obtained from Project TALENT. Asian adolescents were high on mathematics and English, and were low in verbal skills on the six mental ability factors derived from the test battery. They did not differ notably from the other groups on spatial or perceptual abilities.

One recent study that is quite relevant on the topic is the study by Chan, Takanishi, and Kitano (1975), designed by the UCLA Asian American Education Project to provide information about the cultural, family and learning characteristics of Asian American children prior to their entry into public school. Chinese and Japanese American mothers and their children were among the subjects of the study. Only preliminary analyses of the data have been reported, but several findings are of interest. The children performed well on tests of visual discrimination and recognition, memory, and other cognitive tasks. Some between-group differences appeared, however. For example, Chinese children received higher scores than the other children on reflectivity on the Matching Familiar Figures test and Japanese children received higher scores than the other children on the Bender Gestalt test. Of special interest will be analyses of the observations of maternal behavior with their children and the relation of their behavior to children's performance on the experimental tasks.

It appears that, regardless of the groups with whom their performance is compared, children in America of Chinese and Japanese background perform at high levels on all but verbal tasks. The possible interference of a second language spoken at home makes interpretation of their low verbal

scores difficult. There is some suggestion in the studies that young Japanese and Chinese children evidence special skill in numerical and spatial tasks. Unfortunately little information was reported in these studies about the relation of the various cognitive skills to scholastic achievement.

In focusing on the various problems that ethnic minorities must deal with I need to bring to your attention certain facts that the Asian and Pacific Americans must contend with. In the first place, there is a widespread belief that Asian and Pacific Americans do not suffer the discrimination and disadvantages associated with other minority groups.

The stereotyping of the Asian Americans by White Americans as the success model among minority groups by virtue of hard work, education, thrift and initiative has lulled the general public into an attitude of "benign neglect" to the extent that Asian American concerns are considered secondary to the problems of the other minority groups. The general public fails to understand that except for the common facts of immigration and residence in the United States, the Asian Americans represent a heterogeneous and complex group. They are one of the most complex, diverse and misunderstood minority groups in the U.S.

Asian and Pacific Americans include Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, East Indians, Pakistanis, Thais, Hawaiians, Guamanians, and Samoans from the U.S. Trust Territories in the Pacific; and Cambodians, Vietnamese, and other Indo-Chinese "refugees." Thus the group consists of approximately four million people who now live in this country and who

are victims of many of the same social, economic, and political inequities that have victimized Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

The successive waves of Asians who have come to the United States have experienced a repetitive history of labor exploitation, blatant discrimination and violence. The Asian Americans responded to this overwhelming racism by withdrawing, accepting, uncomplaining and simply as "quiet Americans." This quiescence has penalized them harshly since it fostered the attitude of benign neglect among public and private officials to the extent of excluding Asian Americans as a significant minority group. This has been further compounded by the paucity of Asian Americans in policy and decision-making, high administration and management positions in government, education, and private industry.

The myth that Asians are a model minority is a device which separates peoples of color for it sets up one group as a symbol of the good American virtue of having "made it" or having "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps" so why can't the other minorities do the same? This is a divisive myth that needs to be rejected. If we truly believe in the concept of cultural pluralism, we need to give equal respect to the cultural heritages and experiences of all ethnic groups.